Translation of Carl Dahlhaus, 'Foreword' and ‘Mendelssohn and the Traditions of Musical Genre’, from Das Problem Mendelssohn

Two Essays from *Das Problem Mendelssohn* (1974)

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Foreword to *Das Problem Mendelssohn* (*The Mendelssohn Problem*)

To speak of a Mendelssohn renaissance would be doubtless a crude exaggeration (besides being poor style, as was abhorred by Mendelssohn). But the coincidence that two recordings of the youthful String Symphonies have almost simultaneously appeared is more than chance. And equally the increase in academic interest in Mendelssohn is conspicuous, an interest which the present collection of essays may be understood to document. This volume stems from a symposium of November 1972 (a conference for whose organisation we must thank the President of the Mendelssohn-Gesellschaft, Dr Cécile Lowenthal-Hensel). And perhaps the academic enthusiasm that turned its attention to Mendelssohn is all the more 'authentic' given that the exterior date – the 125th anniversary of Mendelssohn's death – offered no compelling reason for scholarly representation according to the usual practice applied for commemorative years.

In the discussion following the papers – a discussion that has not been printed, as it proved difficult to find a balance between the liveliness and involvement of an unedited version on the one hand, and the ossified and sometimes manipulated semblance of logical consistency in a pruned-down version on the other, which would justify publication – in the discussion, it was primarily the problem of musical classicism to which we ever returned.

As questionable as the term 'classicism' may be as a label in the humanities, as a formula by which a subject is not so much designated by name as dismissed without thought, it was equally clearly revealed that the term fulfils a useful heuristic function. First, it appears as if for Mendelssohn the regularity of phrasal and formal structure which has been perceived as 'classicistic' was not simply determined by tradition but – as one may read from his sketches – had often as not been laboriously achieved. Mendelssohn's 'classicism' should therefore not be seen as an epigonism which takes for its preconditions what were simply outcomes in classical music, but would thus be itself an instance of the 'classical': an original, underivative stage of style. Furthermore, the classical movement of Haydn and Mozart is, following Thrasybulos Georgiades, characterised by discontinuity and irregularity (at least in those genres that raise themselves above the humble species of dance and diverting music), so that in music around 1840 continuity and regularity – which are no inheritance of the musically classical – might be taken as 'classicistic' in a general aesthetic sense, but not in any specific music-historical sense.

Secondly, the thesis that the taking over of classical form as a bare shell is characteristic of musical 'classicism' proves questionable. On one hand, the

discrepancy between theme and formal outline is more conspicuous with Chopin (who no one counts among the classicists) than in the 'classicist' Mendelssohn. And on the other, the assertion that with Mendelssohn the song-like themes – the 'Romantic' melodic and harmonic structural-type of the 'song without words' – are merely used to 'fill-out' the formal schemata specified by tradition (and preserved with classical piety) grasps too little. Instead, the (ostensibly conventional) regularity of form constitutes the condition for the variative unfolding of song-like themes (supposedly alien to the sonata). The contradiction between theme and form, unmediated in Chopin, is mediated in Mendelssohn. What appears, seen from Beethoven onwards, as merely discrepancy – as a disintegration of structural details and formal claims, through which the form becomes ('classicistically') a bare casing – must be understood with Mendelssohn as an original presentation of a compositional problem, and recognised as such.

Third, so far as the leaning towards the poetic-programmatic counts as 'Romantic' or 'Neo-Romantic', one may name the opposite tendency, that of establishing an 'absolute musical' form through the association of an ever denser network of thematic-motivic relations, as 'classicistic'. (Accordingly, besides Mendelssohn, Brahms would also number among the classicists, as seems to have been the case with Walter Niemann.) The word use takes for granted that the programmatic music of the New German School represented musical progress and Brahms's technique of developing variation musical conservatism: the idea of loyalty to 'old truths' connects instinctively with the word 'classicistic'. This assumption (which in the nineteenth century no one – whether opponent or follower of Brahms – doubted), is, however, if not untenable, at least made dubious through the consequences that were drawn in the twentieth century by Arnold Schoenberg from the work of Brahms, whom he apostrophised as 'Brahms the progressive'.

The historical characterisation of Mendelssohn – the use or avoidance of the word 'classicism' – is based therefore upon aesthetic premises: on the validity or otherwise of the perception of effortless compositional technique, of epigonism, and of form as 'casing', all of which are included in the notion of classicism. The aesthetic judgement, however, depends in turn upon the critique of musical form, upon the interpretation of the relationship between song-like thematicism and sonata form. And a decisive outcome of the Mendelssohn Symposium (if a participant is permitted a verdict) could well be the insight that a formal-analytical establishment of aesthetic and historical theories about Mendelssohn are both possible and necessary. Possible, as the problem-free appearance, the impression that there is nothing to analyse in Mendelssohn's phrasal and formal structures, has been proved deceptive (to pin down analytically the distinction between sentiment and sentimentality in a *Song without Words* may well be more difficult than to uncover or construct the motivic relationships in a Beethoven sonata). Necessary, because the history of Mendelssohn reception shows that the accumulation of the judgement of generations – for some historians the most reliable type of verdict – has led to nothing more than the hardening of a dubious stereotype, so that (without overprizing it) one may expect rather different results from an analysis of compositional techniques and aesthetics.

On the other hand, musical analyses – whose methods are never presuppositionless but always developed from models with a particular historical location – must be historically supported so as not to fall into unfounded constructs. (Analytical,

aesthetic and historical criteria should be conceived of as being interdependent, connected through their mutual interplay, and not as being related through a one-sided foundation in a single category.)

Mendelssohn's compositional procedures are characterised by a precise feeling for musical genres, for their distinctions and traditions, and for the stylistic peaks pertinent to them; and the fact that later generations (whose consciousness of such stylistic highpoints scarcely extended further than the crude dichotomy between serious and popular music) did not recognise such discreet gradations as generic features (be this in the partsong for male-voice choir that was determined by the particular situation of the music festival and not designed for general dissemination through printing, or the monodic strophic song that remained within the compass of the Goethean song aesthetic) but perceived these as deficiencies in compositional technique and censored them accordingly, is the cause of many errors of judgement about Mendelssohn's works or groups of works.

In order to be adequately historically based, a judgement concerning the 'discontinuity' of the organ sonatas presupposes no less than deciding on the justification of, firstly, the aesthetic claims of the pieces and their stylistic exemplars (and moreover whether we are dealing with a 'notated improvisation' or a 'work' in the emphatic sense of the Classical-Romantic conception), and, secondly, on the generic character of the intended genre's tradition (the notion of the sonata may be meant in the sense of either the pre-classical or classical, and thus a row of heterogeneous movements akin to the suite may appear as either an aesthetic shortcoming or as a legitimate trait of the genre).

Although Mendelssohn literature has hardly been sparse, for a discussion of Mendelssohn as a composer that has a scholarly, scientific character, and thus in which analytically supported argument predominates instead of aesthetic platitudes, there has been until now nothing but scattered attempts. And the point of the Berlin Symposium was therefore not to conclude this discussion and gather the results, but to bring them into conjunction in the first place and to show that this discussion is meaningfully possible. One can fight for the composer Mendelssohn – and indeed fight through scholarship.

'Mendelssohn and the traditions of musical genre'

1

The habit of labelling Mendelssohn a 'classicist' or 'classical Romantic' relies upon the presumption that classicism is a style, whose formal canon originates from a 'classic' that is valid as a paradigm. Mendelssohn belonged to a post-classical age, whose representatives, as Immermann expressed it, perceived themselves as born belatedly, as epigones.

The chance or misfortune to stand on the shoulders or in the shadows of a classic is something musical classicism shares with Romanticism, however, and the dependence on the classical (or at least on the picture one makes of it) is scarcely less in certain sonatas, quartets and symphonies by Schubert, Weber, Chopin or Schumann as in those of Mendelssohn. So much so, that Friedrich Blume felt compelled as a consequence to bracket together classical and Romantic music into a

single epoch, and to deny a profound historical caesura analogous to those boundaries of 1430, 1600 and 1740.[1] Indeed, Blume's thesis that the musical canon of forms did not change with the transition from the classical to the Restoration period – the time of Romanticism, of classicism and the Biedermeier – appears an exaggeration, in view of the Romantic *Lied*, the lyrical piano piece and the symphonic poem. Nevertheless, one must concede to Blume the fact that musical Romanticism, just as with classicism, represents no antithesis to the classical but rather a successor. A polemical relationship to the immediate past, as was characteristic for those epochal breaks of 1430, 1600 and 1740, manifests itself nowhere.

The type of dependence on the classical is different, however, for Mendelssohn from that in other composers, whose Romantic nature no one doubts. The contradiction occurring in Chopin between sonata form, which he summoned from outside rather than making his own from the inside out, and the themes that fill out this schema, is a discrepancy perceptible almost nowhere in Mendelssohn: the musical development of ideas and the formal outline harmonise seamlessly. It would be precarious, however, to designate the disparity between theme and form in Chopin as 'Romantic' and the successful mediation of Mendelssohn as 'classicistic', since the erosion of traditional form into an empty shell, the hardening of what has been handed down by tradition, suggests the that expression 'classicism' is evident not in Mendelssohn but rather in Chopin, in whose sonatas form, as if something indifferent, has become mechanical.

The rigorous conclusion – that the distinction between Romanticism and classicism becomes indefinably blurred and is therefore of little use as a description of historical reality – would, however, be hasty. (Eric Werner's suggestion of avoiding characterising Mendelssohn as a 'classicist' and counting him instead as a 'mannerist' might initially provoke astonishment; this idea, however, is so weakly grounded that it casts upon itself the suspicion that it was motivated by the quite unnecessary attempt to keep some distance from Mendelssohn a vocabulary perceived as pejoratively coloured, replacing it instead with a buzzword that appears fitted to reinvigorate intellectual interest in the subject.)[2] If adhering to the term 'classicist' to characterise Mendelssohn, it is far less the following of the traditional formal schemes than the relation to the musical traditions of genres that proves to be decisive: a feature that justifies the 'classicist' label and provides it with a clearly defined meaning.

2

The idea of musical classicism that emerged in the 19th century was mixed: on the one hand the term classical was used and understood as denoting an era; on the other as a hierarchical ranking [*Rangbegriff*]. The confusion that arose from this equivocation may be troublesome but will not be resolved by tearing the two meanings asunder. Such logical rigour would be inadequate because the decisive determinations of the category of the classical, which make up the notion's history, are all attempts to mediate between the notions of historical era and hierarchical ranking. Moreover, even the strictest advocate of limiting the notion of the classical

[1] Friedrich Blume, 'Romantik', *MGG*, vol. XI, col. 802.

[2] Eric Werner, 'Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy', in *MGG*, vol. IX, col. 93; also cf. Gustav Becking, *Der musikalische Rhythmus als Erkenntnisquelle* (Augsburg, 1928), pp. 201ff.

to a historical epoch hesitates to number among the classics composers such as Pleyel and Kozeluch, and equally the idea that the classics are paradigmatic authors is almost invariably connected with the idea of a classical age that stands out from the rest of history.

Following the older word usage (still maintained in the 19th century alongside the labelling of an age as classical) a classic is a *classicus auctor*, the model author of a genre, in music just as in literature, from where the term comes. In his 1825 treatise *Über Reinheit der Tonkunst* (*On the Purity of the Art of Tones*) Justus Thibaut differentiated between three generic styles – the church, oratorio and operatic – whose mixing he proscribed.[3] The classic example of the church style was Palestrina, that of the oratorio Handel, and that of the operatic style Mozart.[4] Mendelssohn, who visited Thibaut in 1827, respected this canon, although he attempted to convince Thibaut of the importance of Bach ('for in Sebastian everything is together').[5]

A half-century later, in 1875, Heinrich Adolf Köstlin wrote a *Geschichte der Musik im Umriß* (*History of Music in Outline*), that proceeds from similar presuppositions. For Köstlin, the era of 'classical music' reaches from Palestrina to Beethoven, and yet under 'classical music' Köstlin understands not creations of the 'classical' epoch but simply that which epitomises the classical – paradigmatic expression of the musical genre, the 'artistic form' as he names it. Palestrina represents the 'classical Catholic church style', Handel the 'epic', and Bach the 'lyrical form' of the 'classical protestant church style' (meaning oratorios and cantatas). Gluck and Mozart are classics of *opera seria* and *buffa*, Haydn and Beethoven the classics of instrumental music, of the sonata, the string quartet and the symphony.[6] It is therefore crucial in deciding the standing of a composer that a genre's development should reach the 'point de la perfection' in his work.

A piece from the past, however, does not appear as classical in its own consciousness, but only in that of its followers. Although classicism presupposes the classical, whose formal canon it makes its own, on the other hand the classical is only realised as a notion through a later style, through a classicism that is dependent and bases itself upon it. Through this interaction the idea of a classic and the practice of classicism are bound up with one another. And the notion of the classical, which Köstlin formulated, is nothing other than a true reflection of the classicism that Mendelssohn expresses in musical works. Bach and Handel, Gluck and Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven are the *classici auctores*, around whose paradigmatic compositions Mendelssohn oriented himself when he sought to realise generic norms: norms that (in contrast to Berlioz or Liszt) he understood as being fundamental. The individual work is, for Mendelssohn, understood more as the individualisation of a genre which is determined through its past, a past that appears not as dead prehistory but rather as an operative tradition. The historical era from which a classical model is drawn is in no sense a matter of indifference but is constitutive for the present shaping of a musical genre.

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[3] A.F.J. Thibaut, *Über Reinheit der Tonkunst*, seventh edition (Freiburg, 1873), p. 22.
[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 27 & 31.
[5] Susanna Großmann-Vendrey, *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy und die Musik der Vergangenheit* (*Studien zur Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 17) (Regensburg, 1969), p. 25.
[6] H.A. Köstlin, *Geschichte der Musik im Umriß* (Tübingen, 1875).

3

The fact that Mendelssohn's *St Paul*, without being a stylistic copy, is reminiscent of the tone of Handel (and on occasions Bach) has never been misunderstood and provoked the disapproval of rival oratorio composers such as Louis Spohr and Carl Loewe. The affinity to Handel, the archaising as a means to monumentality, is not, however, founded in any general stylistic affinity but stems rather from the generic tradition of the oratorio, whose *classicus auctor* Handel undisputedly was. (It would be hard to discover reminiscences of Handel in Mendelssohn's *Lieder* or duets.)

Mendelssohn's incorporation of chorale numbers within *St Paul* after the model of the *St Matthew Passion* has been reproached in some quarters as a misjudgement of the genre's tradition, as a false transferring from the church oratorio (with the chorale as congregational song) into the concert oratorio.[7] This explanation – as a simple misunderstanding on the composer's part – could be countered, however, in that rather than mistaking the meaning of the tradition Mendelssohn was in fact instigating within compositional practice a transformation that had taken place in musical reception. With the unearthing of the *St Matthew Passion* in 1829 (a rediscovery rather than a discovery) the church oratorio was reinterpreted so as to become a concert oratorio: the liturgical function was not restorable. Yet on the other hand, as Mendelssohn wrote in 1830 to Franz Hauser, it appears that through Bach's music the concert hall was transformed into a church: 'They sang with such reverence as if they were in church. Thus it went quite gloriously for both performances, and it demonstrated how the public always has goodness in them, how they felt that here was not music and concert but religion and church'.[8] The conception of the concert oratorio as an imaginary church music is similarly realised compositionally by Mendelssohn through the chorales in *St Paul*. Such classicism appears not as a copy of the classical against which it leans, but instead documents its practical reception-history [*Wirkungsgeschichte*].

That Mendelssohn's early operas (if a judgement is permitted from fragmentary knowledge of them) are primarily dependent upon Mozart may be understood as a conscious attachment by someone rooted in such discriminating feeling for style to the classic, model composer of *opera buffa* (as well as being due to a beginner's involuntary conformity to the normal musical language of contemporaries who were tinged as Mozart epigones).

More characteristic than an opera composer (especially one who was essentially not an opera composer at all) following the model given by Mozart appears to be the type of classicism in which Mendelssohn expressed an affinity to Gluck, an affinity that may be felt in the music to the tragedies of Sophocles, *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. The Gluck biographer and Mendelssohn's estranged friend and mentor, Adolf Bernhard Marx, spoke of the composer's 'cleverness and discretion' [*Klugheit und Umsicht*], of how Mendelssohn 'here held up Gluck's style as authoritative, a claim that may be justified if one considers how far apart Mendelssohn's *Antigone* stands from his own specific style of writing and how close it is to Gluck'.[9] The

[7] Arnold Schering, *Geschichte des Oratoriums* (Leipzig, 1911; repr. Hildesheim, 1966), p. 438; Alfred Einstein, *Die Romantik in der Musik* (Munich, 1950), p. 97.

[8] Quoted in Großmann-Vendrey, *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy und die Musik der Vergangenheit*, p. 49.

[9] A.B. Marx, *Die Musik des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts und ihre Pflege: Methode der Musik*, second edition (Leipzig, 1873), p. 81.

'discretion' that Marx praises may be understood as stylistic feeling that orients itself to specific models within the respective musical genres. The 'classics', on which the classicist Mendelssohn bases himself, are the model authors of the genres, genres whose boundaries delimit these composers' influence. It is not that Mendelssohn's music may be linked to that of Gluck's through quoted reminiscences. But the cantabile choir declamation, the text-presentation that in a paradoxical interweaving of opposites – at the same time obstinately pedantic and urgently emphatic in effect – instinctively recalls (through a movement that is as fundamental as it is intangible) the tone of Gluck, who apart from here in the music to Sophoclean tragedies has otherwise not left behind the slightest trace in the work of Mendelssohn.

Mendelssohn's songs, in scarcely smaller measure than the *Songs without Words*, met the tone of the *Restorationszeit*, and yet they stand to this extent as more peripheral in the history of the genre, appearing strangely unaffected by the fact that Schubert's *Lieder* had been epochal. One might almost speak of musical Biedermeier; crucial, however, is that Mendelssohn, under Zelter's influence, submitted to a song aesthetic that he perceived as classic: the song aesthetic of Goethe, whose categories and postulates revolved around the idea of 'noble simplicity'. Thus even in the *Lied*, the essential Romantic genre, Mendelssohn was a classicist, and the idea of the classical to which he oriented himself could also have been more meaningful in theory than in compositional practice, in which one can hardly speak of a classic model.

4

The norms abstracted from a classic or 'point of perfection', which guarantee the inner cohesion and continuity of a genre's history, are more clearly marked in Mendelssohn's vocal than in his instrumental music. Not that the search for prior models for the symphonies, concertos or quartets, on which to establish them, would be in vain. One may be reminded of Beethoven's late quartets in the String Quartet in E♭, op. 12, of Haydn in the String Quartet in E♭, op. 44 no. 3; and it was undoubtedly decisive for the peripheral position of Mendelssohn's symphonies in the history of the genre that it was not the genuinely 'symphonic' *Eroica* but rather the 'unsymphonic' *Pastoral* among Beethoven's symphonies that represented the premises from which Mendelssohn started. Despite the connection, the assertion that Haydn and Beethoven were the *classici auctores* of the string quartet and symphony in the same sense that Handel was the classical model of the oratorio for Mendelssohn would nevertheless be an exaggeration or even an error.

The difference between the generic histories of vocal and instrumental music is not incomprehensible. Classicism, as Mendelssohn represented it, grew from an aesthetic education [*Bildung*] that at the same time conceived of itself as moralistic. Despite Beethoven on the one hand and the Romantic dithyrambs to music on the other, in the early nineteenth century the aesthetic was still primarily literarily defined, so that a classicism which was not a naïve, blindly practicing traditionalism but based rather on aesthetic reflection found a more secure hold in vocal music than in instrumental music, whose literary stage emerged alongside the musical (and was more exactly observed by the cultivated public of the early nineteenth century than today).

Moreover, as Kurt von Fischer has shown, the compulsion for the ever-new was historically new with Beethoven.[10] Beethoven, extolled as the *classicus auctor* of instrumental music by Köstin, was a classic whose idea of music did not permit an aesthetically legitimate classicism. The dependence of a genre's tradition on its representation by a *classicus auctor* ran into peril within instrumental music, turning into an empty epigonism. And in that Mendelssohn preserved a sense of piety towards the distant past in his vocal music to which he did not feel bound in his instrumental music, he was a classicist without being an epigone.

[10] Kurt von Fischer, *Versuch über das Neue bei Beethoven*, Conference Proceedings (Bonn, 1970), pp. 3ff.